

ARRANGEMENT AND METHOD FOR CONTROLLING THE TRANSMISSION OF A LIGHT SIGNAL

Technical Field of the Invention

5 The present invention relates generally to an arrangement and method for controlling the transmission of a light signal, and more particularly to an arrangement and method for controlling the transmission of a light signal in an optical communication system.

Background of the Invention

10 Optical communication systems utilize light signals to carry information to various locations within the system. In order to ensure that the appropriate information is carried to the appropriate location within the communication system the light signal needs to be controlled in an efficient and dependable
15 manner. One mechanism utilized to control light signals in an optical communication system employs optical switches and gates. For example, one type of optical switch is known as a micro-electro-mechanical system (MEMS). MEMS consist of extremely small mirrors arranged on special pivots so that the mirrors can be moved in three dimensions. While a MEMS type optical switch
20 can function to control light signals in an optical communication system, this optical switch suffers from a draw back shared by several other prior art optical switches. In particular, these prior art optical switches and gates are complicated and thus expensive and difficult to fabricate.

Thus, a continuing need exists for an arrangement and method for controlling the transmission of a light signal which is relatively simple and inexpensive to fabricate.

Summary of the Invention

In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, there is provided a method of controlling the transmission of a light signal. The method includes (a) transmitting the light signal through a first fiber optic line and (b) receiving the light signal with a light receiving unit operatively coupled to the first fiber optic line. The light receiving unit is operative to refract the light signal so that the light signal is substantially prevented from being transmitted through the light receiving unit if an intensity level of the light signal has a predetermined relationship with an intensity threshold level.

Pursuant to another embodiment of the present invention, there is provided an arrangement for controlling the transmission of a light signal. The arrangement includes a first fiber optic line for transmitting the light signal and a light receiving unit operatively coupled to the first fiber optic line so that the light signal is received by the light receiving unit. The light receiving unit is operative to refract the light signal so that the light signal is substantially prevented from being transmitted through the light receiving unit if an intensity level of the light signal has a predetermined relationship with an intensity threshold level.

Pursuant to yet another embodiment of the present invention, there is provided an optical switch arrangement for controlling the transmission of a light

signal. The arrangement includes a first fiber optic line for transmitting the light signal and a light receiving unit operatively coupled to the first fiber optic line so that the light signal is received by the light receiving unit. The light receiving unit includes a first optical material and a second optical material having an interface therebetween. The first optical material has a linear index of refraction. The second optical material has a nonlinear index of refraction which is dependent on an intensity level of the light signal received with the light receiving unit. The light signal is refracted at the interface such that the light signal is substantially prevented from being transmitted through the light receiving unit if the linear index of refraction of the first optical material does not match the nonlinear index of refraction of the second optical material.

Pursuant to still another embodiment of the present invention, there is provided an optical communications system for transmitting information. The optical communications system includes an optical switch arrangement for controlling transmission of a light signal. The optical switch arrangement includes (i) a first fiber optic line for transmitting the light signal and (ii) a light receiving unit operatively coupled to the first fiber optic line so that the light signal is received by the light receiving unit. The light receiving unit includes a first optical material and a second optical material having an interface therebetween. The first optical material has a linear index of refraction. The second optical material has a nonlinear index of refraction which is dependent on an intensity level of the light signal received with the light receiving unit. The light signal is refracted at the interface such that the light signal is substantially prevented from

being transmitted through the light receiving unit if the linear index of refraction of the first optical material does not match the nonlinear index of refraction of the second optical material.

It is an object of the present invention to provide a new and useful method and arrangement for controlling the transmission of a light signal.

It is an object of the present invention to provide an improved method and arrangement for controlling the transmission of a light signal.

It further the object of the present invention to provide a method and arrangement for controlling the transmission of a light signal which less expensive and complicated to fabricate.

The above and other objects, features, and advantages of the present invention will become apparent from the following description and the attached drawings.

Brief Description of the Drawings

FIG. 1 is a schematic representation of an optical communication system which incorporates features of the present invention therein; and

FIG. 2 is a cross sectional fragmentary view of a fiber optic line of the optical communication system of FIG. 1.

Detailed Description of a Preferred Embodiment

While the invention is susceptible to various modifications and alternative forms, a specific embodiment thereof has been shown by way of example in the drawings and will herein be described in detail. It should be understood,

however, that there is no intent to limit the invention to the particular form disclosed, but on the contrary, the intention is to cover all modifications, equivalents, and alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

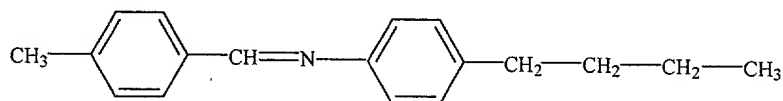
5 Referring now to FIG. 1 there is shown an exemplary optical communication system 10 which incorporates various features of the present invention therein. Optical communication system 10 includes an optical switch or gate arrangement 12, a fiber optic line 14, a fiber optic line 16, an electrooptical converter 26, and an electrooptical converter 28.

10 Optical switch arrangement 12 includes a light receiving unit 18. Light receiving unit 18 includes a first or linear optical material 20 and a second or nonlinear optical material 22. The linear optical material 20 and the nonlinear optical material 22 have a planar interface 24 therebetween.

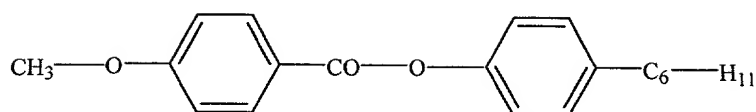
15 The linear optical material 20 has a linear index of refraction, whereas the nonlinear optical material 22 has a nonlinear index of refraction. In particular, the index of refraction of the linear optical material 20 remains constant irrespective of the intensity level of a light signal passing therethrough. Hence, as the intensity level of light signals received by light receiving unit 18 varies, the index of refraction of the linear optical material 20 remains constant. Suitable
20 optical materials for use as the linear optical material 20 of the present invention include glass or quartz.

The index of refraction of the nonlinear optical material 22 varies based on the intensity level of the light signal passing therethrough. In particular, if the

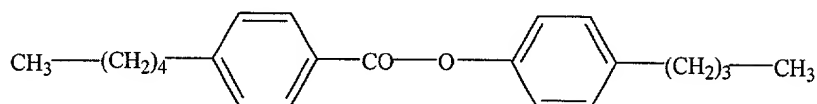
intensity level of the light signal passing through the nonlinear optical material 22 is below a predetermined intensity threshold value, the index of refraction of the nonlinear optical material 22 remains constant. However, if the intensity level of the light signal passing through the nonlinear optical material 22 is above the intensity threshold value, the index of refraction of the nonlinear optical material 22 changes. Hence, if the intensity level of the light signal received by light receiving unit 18 is below the intensity threshold value, the index of refraction of the nonlinear optical material 22 remains constant. However, if the intensity level of the light signal received by the light receiving unit 18 is equal to or above the threshold value, the index of refraction of the nonlinear optical material 22 changes. Suitable optical materials having nonlinear indices of refraction for use as the nonlinear optical material 22 of the present invention are the nonlinear optical materials disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,561,541 entitled "Frustrated Total Internal Reflection Optical Power Limiter" which was issued on October 1, 1996 to Sharp et al, the disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference. For example, nonlinear optical materials which can be used in the present invention include MBBA which has the name N-(p-methoxybenzylidene)-p-butylaniline, MEBBA which has the following structure



PePMeOB which has the following structure



and BuPPEB which has the following structure



5 The nonlinear optical material 22 preferably has an index of refraction
 which matches the index of refraction of the linear optical material 20 when the
 intensity level of the light signal passing therethrough is below the intensity
 threshold level. What is meant herein by the terms "match" or "matches" is that
 the index of refraction of a first optical material is either equal to, or within a
 10 predetermined tolerance range of, the index of refraction of a second optical
 material so that a light signal can pass through light receiving unit 18. In
 particular, it should be appreciated that if the index of refraction of the linear
 optical material 20 matches the index of refraction of the nonlinear optical
 material 22, light signal passing therethrough is unattenuated by the optical
 15 materials 20, 22. However, if the index of refraction of the linear optical material
 20 does not match the index of refraction of the nonlinear optical material 22, the
 light signal passing therethrough is refracted at the planar interface 24 between
 the optical materials 20, 22. What is meant herein by the terms "refract",
 "refracts", "refracted", "refracting", or "refraction" is the bending or redirecting of
 20 the light signal passing through the optical materials 20, 22 such that light signal

is substantially prevented from passing all the way through light receiving unit 18.

As shall be discussed below in greater detail, such refraction of the light signal passing through the optical materials 20, 22 substantially prevents the light signal from being received by, and propagated through, fiber optic line 16.

5 Each fiber optic cable 14 and 16 is substantially identical and thus only fiber optic cable 14 will be discussed in detail herein. As shown in FIG. 2, fiber optic cable 14 includes a core 36 surrounded by cladding 34, which in turn is surrounded by a coating 32. Core 36 is made of substantially pure silica. Cladding 34 is a glass which serves to guide a light signal in the core 36 and
10 allow as little as possible to leave through the sides of fiber optic cable 14. The coating 32 is typically a polymer layer which just makes it easier to handle the fiber. Fiber optic cables like fiber optic cable 14 are well known and commercially available.

Now referring back to FIG. 1, electrooptical converters 26 and 28 are
15 operative to convert electrical signals to optical signals (i.e. light signals) and optical signals back into electrical signals, respectively. Electrooptical converters like 26 and 28 are well known and commercially available.

Still referring to FIG. 1, electrooptical converter 26 is operatively coupled to fiber optic line 14 such that electrooptical converter 26 can generate and
20 transmit light signals through fiber optic line 14 in the direction indicated by arrow 38. Light receiving unit 18 is operatively coupled to fiber optic line 14 so that light receiving unit 18 receives the light signal emanating from fiber optic line 14. As previously discussed, if the intensity level of the light signal received by the

light receiving unit 18 is equal to or above the threshold value, the index of
refraction of the nonlinear optical material 22 changes. Accordingly, the index of
refraction of the linear optical material 20 does not match the index of refraction
of the nonlinear optical material 22, therefore the light signal being received by
5 light receiving unit 18 is refracted at the planar interface 24 between the optical
materials 20, 22. As such, the light signal being received by light receiving unit
18 does not pass therethrough, and thus is stopped from being further
transmitted in optical communications system 10 while the intensity of the light
signal is equal to or above the threshold value. (Note that when the light signal is
10 refracted at the planar interface 24 and does not pass through light receiving unit
18, this condition is analogous to "logic 1", i.e. where the optical switch
arrangement 12 is "off" and not transmissive; Further note that the light signal
could be modulated so as to decrease the intensity thereof so that the intensity is
below the threshold level and, as discussed below, further transmitted in optical
15 communications system 10.)

However, if the intensity level of the light signal received by the light
receiving unit 18 is below the threshold value, the index of refraction of the
nonlinear optical material 22 remains the same. Accordingly, the index of
refraction of the linear optical material 20 matches the index of refraction of the
20 nonlinear optical material 22, and therefore the light signal being received by
light receiving unit 18 passes therethrough. (Note that when the light signal
passes through the light receiving unit 18 this condition is analogous to "logic 0",
i.e. where the optical switch arrangement 12 is "on" and fully transmissive.) As

such, the light signal exits light receiving unit 18 and is further transmitted in optical communications system 10. In particular, fiber optic cable 16 is operatively coupled to light receiving unit 18 so that the light signal passing through light receiving 18 is further transmitted through fiber optic cable 16 in the direction indicated by arrow 40. The light signal transmitted through fiber optic cable 16 is then received by electrooptical converter 28 which is operatively coupled to fiber optic cable 16. Electrooptical converter 28 can then convert the light signal into an electrical signal, and the resultant electrical signal can be processed by, for example, an integrated circuit device (not shown) of optical communications system 10.

It should be understood that while FIG. 1 illustrates light receiving unit 18 being exterior to fiber optic cables 14 and 16, it is contemplated that light receiving unit 18 could be positioned within a fiber optic cable. For example, as shown in FIG. 2, light receiving unit 18 can be positioned within a lumen 30 defined by fiber optic cable 14 and still function as described above as a light signal travels through lumen 30 in the direction indicated by arrows 42.

In light of the above discussion it should be appreciated that the optical switch (gate) arrangement 12 of the present invention is relatively simple and inexpensive to fabricate as compared to other prior art switch (gate) arrangements.

While the invention has been illustrated and described in detail in the drawings and foregoing description, such illustration and description is to be considered as exemplary and not restrictive in character, it being understood that

